FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
May 13, 2001

"The Many Faces of God"
John M. Buchanan

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have won for us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us,
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. Amen.

Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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May 13, 2001
"THE MANY FACES OF GOD"
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 10: 22-30 (NRSV)
Hosea 11: 1-4 (NRSV)

"I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." (Hosea 11:4) NRSV

Dear God, we area grateful today for connections, relationships, for love. We are grateful for those who loved us into existence, nurtured and cared for us. We're grateful for ongoing relationships of support and encouragement. And, O God, we are grateful for your creative love that is behind it all. As we worship together, remind us again of your fatherly and motherly presence in our lives, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The preacher is in a dilemma on Mother's Day. It's not on the liturgical calendar; it's not an official church festival at all, like Epiphany and Pentecost. There are no lectionary texts for Mother's Day. In fact, the church officially ignores it—which probably is not a good idea because the fact is that lots of people are in church today because it's Mother's Day and are either with their mothers, or are thinking about their mothers. A sobering moment for me was a phone call a few days before this occasion several years ago from a church member who said, "I'm bringing my mother to church this Sunday. So, make it good."

The preacher knows what's at stake here, knows that this is a major event for Hallmark and florists and restaurants and for a lot of his or her people. The preacher remembers the red and white carnations. You wore a red carnation if your mother was alive, white if she was gone. The preacher also had a mother who thought Mother's Day was much ado about nothing, she said, but when she died, her memorabilia included Mother's Day notes from her sons.

So I resolved this dilemma by remembering a bit of homiletical advice that has been around for a long time. The young minister, about to face his first Sunday in the pulpit frantically called his professor and mentor. "What shall I preach about?" he asked. And the wise professor answered: "Preach about God and preach about twenty minutes." So here goes. A Mother's Day sermon on the "Many Faces of God."

"God at 2000," was the name of a fascinating symposium held last year, at the beginning of a new century and millennium. Two Christian scholars, Marcus Borg, Professor of Theology and Culture at Oregon State University, and Ross MacKenzie, Director of the Department of Religion at Chautauqua and a church historian, were the organizers. The event was televised and brought together a live audience, a TV audience, and seven distinguished religious leaders and thinkers, including Borg, Bishop Desmon Tutu, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a Catholic nun and an

Islamic scholar to discuss "How I see God." The two premises of "God at 2000" were that how we think about God matters and how we think about God changes.

It was a lively exchange and the presentations are published in a new book, *God at 2000.* Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, popular author, began whimsically. "God at 2000?" The man is asking me to some kind of e-mail address. You know, God at 2000 dot com or dot org or, dot net, yes, that's it. God at 2000 dot net. This got me to wondering if God did have a web site, what would it look like? I mean, how would you get there, how many links would you find? And once you did, where could you go? Just imagine: the server to end all servers." (P.43)

Well, as it happened, the *New Yorker* took up the idea in an editorial piece a while ago. Observing that everybody is worrying about the economy and the environment these days, the writer wondered what's going on and said that "the thought has occurred to several people that the way to find out what God has in mind might be to get on-line and ask him. . . .So, with fear and trembling one sits down at the keyboard—browsing for God.

He decided to go slow at first and try some lesser words associated with God, without much luck.

> Hope—was blank. 'Sorry, this site is not accepting requests.'
> Mercy dot com links you to a Catholic hospital in Knoxville.
> Charity is a site for collecting money.
> Beauty—give the gift of beauty for under $40.00. Calvin Klein.
> Truth turns out to be a hardware store in Owatonna, Minnesota.
> Jesus dot com is some guy from Virginia who is either a performing artist or a nut.

Finally, he types God dot com . . . "a long wait, much confused backing and forthing on the lower margins of the page and then, not even 'click again on the reload icon,' but merely these chilling words: 'Sorry, no such address.'" ("The Talk of the Town, *The New Yorker,* 1/8/01)

How you think about God, how you see God, matters. It matters for your faith but also the way you see yourself and your neighbors and the way you live your life in the world. "Everyone has a theological house," Sallie MacFague, who teaches at Vanderbilt University, said. I like that idea. Some are fancy—some are plain—some have open doors and windows—some are locked up like a prison, some never change—some renovate, add new rooms—take off rooms. Everyone has a theological house—a theology—a faith. Even the atheist has faith that there is no God.

Professor Borg in his own God at 2000 presentation told a little about his own journey—which sounded familiar. He grew up in a Lutheran Church, went to Sunday school and church and thought he and the Lutherans knew quite a bit about God, actually. God was up there in heaven, probably sitting on a throne, managing human history, intervening as necessary to keep things on track. But then, with a few more years, "up there," wasn't adequate, so God was "out there" somewhere. And then the space age changed all that, and "out there" got a lot farther away and pretty soon, with some intellectual growth, the whole notion of God occupying space and time wasn't adequate. And somewhere about that point, many of us simply stop thinking: vacate the

house, get off the bus, or—as an alternate, lock up the house, bar the doors and windows—keep everything just the way it used to be and proceed into the complexities of the world with a faith that hasn't changed since Junior High School.

Unless we learn to change the way we think theologically, unless we can open some doors and windows, the religious enterprise is in a whole lot of trouble and we are probably headed for what Bishop John Shelby Spong calls the "church alumni association."

Interestingly, the first Biblical word on the subject is a word of caution—"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . you shall not bow down before them." The first biblical word on the subject is a warning against trying to characterize God too precisely. The idols of ancient religion, the gods the children of Israel saw all around them, had to do with the mystery of fertility. Many of these were specifically female, maternal. The first commandment condemnation of idols is not a condemnation of their femininity. It is a warning against the limitations of God inherent in any human characterization. It even has a name—anthropomorphism: God in the form of a human being.

And so Hebrew scriptures never try to describe God with long lists of adjectives. Rather, the Old Testament tells stories about the acts of God and in the process uses metaphors, similes, parables and poems—all of which are human constructs and all of which grow out of and reflect the culture of the time. The predominant symbol of power and authority was the King. So God is described in royal, monarchial terms. The predominant activity was herding and then agriculture. God is described as a shepherd. The predominant relational symbol of power and authority was the patriarch of the tribe or clan. So God is called Father.

We know and love these symbols, but our experience with monarchy is not exactly personal or relevant, or positive, for that matter, and when a metaphor for God is the only way we can see or think about or pray to God, we're stuck theologically—our theological house is a prison, and we have an idol. Feminist theologians have helped us see that if the only symbols and the only language we have for God is male and masculine, we're not getting the full picture.

Sallie McFague writes: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." This taunt from childhood is haunting in its lying bravado. It is the 'names' that hurt: one would prefer sticks and stones. Names matter because what we call something, how we name it, is to a great extent what it is to us." (*Models of God,* p.3)

What happened to Western Christian thinking is that it got stuck with exclusively masculine images of God, a form of verbal idolatry. If the only words we have for God are male words—we have, in fact, created an idol, a limited version of the God of the Bible.

To be sure, the majority of Biblical words about God are male.

God is:

Warrior	Exodus 15:3
Husband	Hosea 2:16
King	Psalm 98:6
Father	Psalm 10:13

But the Bible also calls God a

Midwife	Psalm 22:9
Mistress of a household	Psalm 123:2
Birth giver	Isaiah 42:16
Mother	Isaiah 66:13

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."
Isaiah 66:13

Hosea, the prophet, uses some of the loveliest images of God in the entire Bible.

> "When Israel was a child, I loved him,
> And out of Egypt I called my son
> It was I who taught (them) to walk . . .
> I took them up in my arms
> I led them with cords of human kindness
> I was to them like those
> Who lift infants to their cheeks.
> I bent down to them and fed them."

Those are clearly feminine, maternal images. I don't know about you, but the one who bent down to feed me was not a father.

After all, we do believe that human beings are created in the image of God. And clearly human beings are female and male. So, asks Sallie McFague, "What's all the fuss about?"

The real scandal of the Bible's description of God, Jesus' own characterization of God, is not gender at all. It is the idea of intimacy and kindness and caring and closeness.

Monarchs are essentially untouchable. Kings are distant, powerful and kind, perhaps, on occasion, but they are not vulnerable. The God of the Bible enters into covenants with the people, gets intimately involved in their history, their lives and affairs, loves and cares so much that God becomes angry, heart broken, grief stricken when they stray, God is so involved that even the valley of the shadow of death is no limit to God's presence and love. Jesus used the most intimate word in his language, Abba, "Daddy," and the important thing about it is not its gender but its intimacy.

"No human love can be perfect," Sallie McFague writes, "but parental love is the best metaphor we have. Parent—Mother—All of us, female and male, have the womb as our first home, all of us are born from the bodies of our mother, all of us are fed by our mothers. What better imagery could there be for expressing the most basic reality of existence: that we live and move and have our being in God."

All metaphors are limited. Not all women are mothers. Not all mothers are loving and life-giving. Not all men are fathers. Not all fathers are strong and faithful. Some mothers abandon their babies. Some fathers abuse their children. Language is limited. The preacher knows—knows that if the only language we have for God is masculine, some will be left out. So, yes, we do—for the health of our theology—and our relationship with God—yes, we need to loosen up and break out, or open, the windows and doors of our theological house, and find some new words—God as mother, for instance, God as she, for instance.

Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine who participated in the "God at 2000" symposium, said, "Who is God for me at 2000? Not the God I thought I knew in 1950, a God of wrath and judgment, who makes traffic lights turn green and finds parking places, a God of rules and laws." Sister Joan is trying out some bracing new metaphors for a God who is much bigger and more mysterious—'Cosmic unity, everlasting light, eternal limitlessness . . . greater than doctrines or denominations, who calls us beyond and out of our limits.'" (p. 69)

But the real scandal of the Biblical concept of God is its immediacy and intimacy. Jesus destabilized the going theology of his people and their religious leaders by suggesting that God was a lot less interested in rule following and righteousness based on keeping oneself pure and holy—than in love and forgiveness and acceptance. Jesus challenged the going theology of his day—a God who is King and Judge—with pictures of God as a father running down the road to welcome a wandering child home again, God as a woman turning her household inside out searching for one lost coin, God as a banquet host welcoming outsiders, outcasts, to his table; God as a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wings; God as a mother lifting a child to her cheek, leaning down to nurse her child.

God—the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims, loves each of us personally, intimately as if we were a precious only child. God, we believe, has come among us, lived our life, died our death—in Jesus Christ, God's son, God's child.

And Christian faith—Christian life, is not a matter of believing ideas, so much as it is living a deepening relationship with God, our father, our mother.

Words are limited, but I did read some recently that rise above the ordinary when it comes to words about God. They were written by Danny Dutton, age 8, but they are anything but childish. He was asked to explain God.

Danny did. He wrote:

"One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grown-ups, just babies, I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way, He doesn't have to take up his valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that up to mothers and fathers.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers and things, pray at times besides bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV because of this. Because he hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in his ears, unless he thought of a way to turn it off."

There's a lot more and its all pretty good, and then Danny comes to his conclusion.

"If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It's good to know God's around, when you're scared in the dark or when you can't swim very good and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids."

Well said, Danny.

"As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion . . . ." (Psalm 103:13)

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you, says the Lord." (Isaiah 66:13)

At the very end of the *New Yorker* piece on God dot com, God dot net, there was a remarkable paragraph—at last one turns to God dot org. "And there he is, in a mysteriously unsigned white page with six perfect and consoling words: "Coming soon—a site for all."

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Donna Gray, Interim Associate Pastor for Children and Family Ministry

Almighty God, in whom we live and move and have our being, we praise you. You have made us to be homegrown. You have planted us in families. You have sheltered us under parents or guardians. You have nurtured us along the way. Strong mother God, warm father God, like a good gardener you have cared for our growth. We thank you for the pattern of family life. All experience is here, from the greeting of birth to death's good-bye, and here we learn that we belong and that we can love. Enable us to make our homes places where the dynamics of love and forgiveness are daily at work. Grant us the grace of patience when tempers are tried. Give us the grace to forgive when we feel offended. Help us to add small miracles of love and laughter in our homes.

We thank you for redeeming our time, for sanctifying the everyday events of life with your presence.

Where there is joy, you are there to add depth and meaning to our celebration.

Where there is sorrow, you are present to sustain and comfort.

Where there is pain, we see the face of your Son upon the cross, assuring us that even in suffering we have enduring fellowship with you.

Where there is hopelessness and despair, you are present to reveal, in your time, new possibilities.

Send your Spirit with us as we go forth from your house, so that in our daily work, in our struggle with problems, in our efforts to heal, we will find wholeness and completeness in you.

Hear us as we pray Our Father . . .